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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Social Workers, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The theme of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work", is totally congruent with the aims of the International Federation of Social Workers. The Federation represents three quarters of a million social workers who are members of professional social work associations from 90 countries. The Federation seeks to promote social justice and human rights for all people, particularly for those most disadvantaged by social, economic and political forces. The Federation has stated clearly its position on issues of relevance to women in its International Policy on Women adopted in 1999 and updated in 2000. The policy position asserts that women's rights are inherently human rights. "The social work profession's core commitment to human rights must involve a commitment to protecting and preserving the basic rights of all women and girls." This commitment coincides with the theme of the fifty-fifth session as well as with the Millennium Development Goals, not only with particular regard to primary schooling (Goal 2) and gender equality and empowerment of women (Goal 3), but also with regard to reducing child mortality (Goal 4), improving maternal health (Goal 5), and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. For these protections are fundamental foundations for the attainment of higher goals.

2. Without securing the human rights of women, from childhood through adolescence, adulthood and old age, the chance of achieving the goals of the fifty-fifth session are seriously compromised. Human rights protection, which social work holds as a core value of the profession, must undergird all efforts for the advancement of women. Girls and women must be safe from the hazards of their birth, hunger, neglect, enslavement, rape, torture, trafficking and other violations of their human rights so that they may participate in opportunities in education, gainful and protected work, and involvement in the economic and political process.

Education

3. According to Goal 2, primary education is a human right. Yet two thirds of those who are illiterate are women. There has been some progress in realizing this goal, but gender parity in primary education has yet to be achieved. This fact continuously hampers women's ability to support themselves and their families. In countries with non-mandatory, limited access to education girls often remain illiterate, at home or at work. Increasing numbers of girls are forced to migrate because of natural disasters and human conflict. While in transit or refugee camps girls often are unable to access and participate in education.

4. Today over 1.2 billion people live on less than US$ 1 a day, and a majority of the world's absolute poor are female. Worldwide, women on average earn about 50 per cent of what men bring home each year. Poverty detrimentally affects girls' and women's ability to access education. In developing regions overall, girls in the poorest 20 per cent of households are 3.5 times more likely to be out of school than girls in the richest households and 4 times more likely to be out of school than boys from the richest households. School fees as well as the need to care for younger children also often prevent girls from pursuing primary education.

5. In poor families women and girls are often the last to eat, and in families with very limited food this often means no food at all. In poor countries girls more frequently suffer from malnutrition than boys. Girls and women who are indigenous or who suffer from various physical, developmental or emotional disabilities are especially disadvantaged and may have the worst struggles with poverty and pursuing education. While poverty affects households as a whole, because of the gender division of labour and responsibilities for household welfare, girls may be kept at home to help with household chores and the care of younger siblings, thus preventing them from pursuing education.

Technology and science

6. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees all people, including women, the right to "share in scientific advancement and its benefits". Since access to science and technology is a major driving force for well-being, it is essential to all people, irrespective of gender, that we address the underrepresentation and barriers to participation of women in science and technology education and employment, and the exclusion of women from access to technology. Women represent the majority of people in poverty and do the majority of the world's work. Coupled with this is the fact that women in developing countries tend to lack access to basic technologies that would reduce labour-intensive tasks. Increasing such access allows women to spend less time on such work and increases access to education and paid employment, benefiting both women and members of their households. The issue of women's access to such technology must therefore be addressed. The failure to address this issue is one of the factors that perpetuate the condition of women in poverty.

7. Along with this, the exclusion of women from science and technology knowledge production means that advances tend to disproportionately benefit men. To ensure that technology is accessible to women, such gender biases need to be eliminated from research and development and researchers must be sensitized to gender issues. This requires the increased participation of women in science and technology education and employment. Gender gaps and accessibility issues in education must therefore be addressed along with the reforming of the gender bias in science and technology institutions and in society that leads to the exclusion of women from science and technology. To increase the participation of women in the fields of science and technology, barriers to participation must be addressed, particularly in hiring, retention and promotion. Related to this is the issue of unequal distribution of household work and child-rearing on the basis of gender, which must also be addressed to ensure that women are not unequally affected in terms of their ability to participate equally in employment. Eliminating such biases and ensuring that women have equal access to and participate equally in science and technology therefore requires the addressing of gender discrimination in households, education, employment and related national policies.

Equal access to full employment and decent work by women

8. The importance of women's access to employment is recognized in Millennium Development Goals 1 and 3, with women's participation in non-agricultural employment cited as an indicator for success while promoting full and productive employment for all. There is a lack of gender-responsive policy interventions to address increasing labour market constraints including the

expanding gap between formal and informal work settings, the decrease in access to full employment and gender bias in employment culture.

9. The lack of access to decent work and the overall gender division of labour results in poverty among women. Constraints on women in the labour market such as the disproportionate distribution of gender-segregated and unpaid work decrease the efficiency of women as a work group. The issue of the unequal distribution of household work and child-rearing on the basis of gender must also be addressed to ensure that women have equal opportunity to participate in and sustain employment, and equal opportunity for promotion and employment mobility. Greater access to housing, information and communications technology, guaranteed social benefits and health care will increase access to full employment and decent work by women. Trade policies and foreign direct investment which promote sustainable employment opportunities will increase access and participation by women.

Summary and recommendations

10. The Federation firmly believes that the preceding three topics outline critical concerns for all people around the world. The International Federation of Social Workers has the following recommendations:

(a) Implementation and monitoring of efforts to achieve these goals in education, technology and equal access to employment must be viewed from the perspective of human rights protection;

(b) The United Nations, Governments, business and civic society need to work together to promote equal access to education for girls and women;

(c) The provision of needed social and economic supports by Governments can serve to promote equal access and educational achievement for girls and women;

(d) Gender bias must be eliminated from research development in science and technology through the increased participation of women in science and technology-related knowledge production, education and employment.